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FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3482  
INFO RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY 2381  
RUCNARF/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE  
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RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 3701

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 001266

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS, EAP/CM, DRL/IRF, DRL/AWH

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [VM](#)

SUBJECT: PATRIOTIC HCMC AND HANOI RALLIES NEVERTHELESS CHALLENGE GVN  
SENSE OF ORDER

REF: (A) HANOI 2060, (B) HO CHI MIN 766, (C) HO CHI MIN 706

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1. (SBU) Organizing themselves through blogs and instant messaging networks, students in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi gathered on December 9, and again on December 16 in Ho Chi Minh City, to protest China's decision to set up a government unit in Hainan to administer the Paracel and Spratly islands. GVN authorities worked to isolate the protesters in HCMC and persuade them to disband, giving some credibility to Ministry of Foreign Affairs statements that these protests were "spontaneous" and "unauthorized." HCMC authorities also temporarily detained several political dissidents to prevent them from joining the December 16 protests. The protests have generated lively internet commentary. End summary.

#### Students Express Their Patriotism

2. (SBU) On December 9 and 16 hundreds of young Vietnamese expressed anti-China sentiments in front of China's Consulate in HCMC over Vietnam's perceived weak response to China's decision to set up administrative control over the Paracel and Spratly islands -- groups of coral islands in the South China Sea that have been the subject of territory dispute between China and Vietnam. Consulate contacts predict that protests will continue this coming Sunday, December 23. Student protests also took place in Hanoi on December 9 in front of the Chinese Embassy (reftel).

3. (SBU) ConGen HCMC contacts and media reports described the first demonstration on December 9 as peaceful amid a heavy police presence. According to many of the demonstrators, calls for demonstration circulated through Yahoo Messenger and by Internet for several days before the December 9 rally. Although the Vietnamese MFA spokesman said the protest was "spontaneous" and "unauthorized", many demonstrators believed that it was tacitly encouraged by GVN. HCMC government leaders came to defuse the protest, promising that the HCMC Communist Youth Union (the Communist Party's youth organization) would lead another demonstration the next Sunday (Dec 16). Although the second demonstration did take place, it did not appear to be organized by the Youth Union.

4. (SBU) On December 16 about 100 university students approached the Chinese Consulate only to find that the area had been cordoned off by police. Observers told us demonstrators moved to a lawn in the city center, and having swelled to 700 were surrounded by uniformed and plainclothes security forces. According to witnesses, some university professors came to "explain" to the students that their patriotism was appreciated

but they should not create an opportunity for "bad elements" to take advantage of their patriotism. In Hanoi on the morning of December 16, a heavy police presence around the Chinese Embassy precluded any repetition of the previous week's protest.

#### Rounding up the Usual Suspects

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¶5. (SBU) On December 15, the day before the second demonstration, the Cong An Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh (HCMC Police newspaper) published a announcement, warning that the police had detected "conspiracies by hostile reactionary forces to ignite anti-China protest and create public disorder." The announcement listed "terrorist group Viet Tan" and the "reactionary Youth Assembly for Democracy" as leading conspirators. In fact, several democracy activists, including Democratic Party of Vietnam Deputy Secretary General Tran Khue and Bloc 8406 leader Do Nam Hai, were prevented by police from reaching the demonstration site. Tran Khue and Do Nam Hai told us they were detained for several hours and only released when the demonstration came to and end at around three that afternoon.

#### HCMC Media and the IT Play a New Role

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¶6. (SBU) Frustration among Vietnamese towards China's action appears high, and the surge of nationalism appears to have crossed political barriers. On Dec 6, the HCMC-based popular daily Tuoi Tre ran an editorial, calling China's decision to set up administrative control over the islands "unacceptable," and for the first time since 1975 recalled the losing battle between ARVN navy and Chinese navy in 1974 when China invaded the Paracels. The article wrote that the ARVN lost 58 men in that battle to "defend the motherland." The article resulted in increased attention to the author's public blog in which he routinely discusses the ARVN navy. [Comment: The protestors' use of instant messaging and blogs to organize their activities and spread their novel ideas of patriotism on the internet demonstrate that technology is slowly eroding the government's ability to control communication. End Comment.]

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¶7. (SBU) The internet also serves a forum for open debate on the topic. Following the December 9 demonstration in Hanoi, Ha Quang Thuy a vice rector of the Hanoi National University's Technological College, reportedly wrote a letter asking students not to participate in future anti-China demonstrations that was posted on "hoangsa.org" (Paracels.org). The letter prompted a flurry of comments from both domestic and overseas Vietnamese criticizing the vice rector. Some overseas Vietnamese suggested that the [communist] regime should also be blamed for the soft approach. Another hoangsa.org article called for students to refrain from conducting future anti-China demonstrations, "detrimental" to Sino-Vietnamese relations and asserted that the Communist Party of Vietnam was correct in taking a "flexible, mild approach" to resolving the South China Sea dispute. "As a new non-permanent UNSC member, Vietnam is actually benefiting from current close ties with China" and China has proven to be one of Vietnam's most important economic and trading partners, the anonymous author asserted. Many follow-on posts suggested that the author must be ethnic Chinese Vietnamese, contending that the demonstrations are patriotic and now is a good chance to see the nation rally for a good cause.

Comment:

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¶8. (SBU) Dissidents' attempts to join the anti-China protests put the GVN in a dilemma: the GVN needs to strike balance between its attempts to use nationalism as a tool for strengthening public loyalty and its need to manage historically complex relations with a powerful neighbor that is sensitive to perceived slights. With widespread criticism among overseas and domestic Vietnamese that GVN has been too submissive and done too little to protect the motherland, demonstrations in Vietnam, even for nationalist reasons, continue to be a gravely sensitive issue.

¶9. (SBU) It is always tempting to assume that such protests in Vietnam are organized by the GVN. In this case, that was not at all clear. While police did not break up the protest, they cordoned off the protestors to prevent others from joining and prevented anyone from taking pictures -- even going so far as to send police out to admonish a group of cruise boat tourists who had been at the nearby Notre Dame Cathedral in Ho Chi Minh City. Police also strongly encouraged passersby who lingered to move along. In short, the police treated the protestors exactly the same way they treated the last rights protestors earlier this year. End comment.

¶10. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.  
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